

“I Can’t Breathe”

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20 minutes read

Last updated 9 June 2020

This article addresses the killing of George Floyd that occurred on May 25th 2020 and explains the concept of othering, how it dehumanises its victim and what is the solution to racism.

The killing of George Floyd on May 25th 2020 tugged at our collective conscience. With every waning breath and dying plea ‘I can’t breathe’ screamed in its silence and we gasped together. The coalescing of brutal indifference of state power with a forlorn plea for mercy, for understanding, for pity, for empathy, placed us all in an unavoidable frame of witnessing. History was on repeat. On July 17th 2014, 43-year-old Eric Garner was killed in a chokehold by a New York City Police Department officer, whilst repeating “I can’t breathe” at least eleven times. Unlike Floyd, Garner was not physically still when he held up his hands, protesting his innocence to the NY police officers who encountered him. His positioning was one of trying to create space between him and the officers. He was threatened within his space and violated.

The three words spoken by Garner and later by Floyd, “I can’t breathe” topped the list of the most notable quotations of 2014 according to the Yale Book of Quotations. But it is the first of his words, it is the simple but highly evocative pronoun “I” which draws us, through a consideration of a range of imagined tones to a perspective-taking with George Floyd and Eric Garner. As Ben Zimmer describes, “To intone the words “I can’t breathe,” surrounded by thousands of others doing the same, is an act of intense empathy and solidarity. The empathy comes from momentarily stepping into the persona of Eric Garner at that instant the life was being choked out of him. It is a kind of rhetorical tribute to inhabit his subject position, taking on the pronoun “I” and repeating the words he helplessly repeated eleven times.”¹ Words reminisced, like the singing of popular songs of deceased artists or the chanting of words during pilgrimage rituals, or during memorials, all contain a sense of empathic solidarity through mimicry.

One way in which the body becomes the main medium that facilitates empathy for another as it symbolically did in the kneeling protests is found in the figurative expression of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem ‘The Haunted Oak’. In this, the bodies of lynch victims and the tree share a vulnerability through the apprehending of a shared pain. Dunbar’s poem, written and published in 1900, could have been based on one of the dozens of lynchings that occurred that year. However, it was more closely inspired by a story that Dunbar heard through an elderly black man concerning his nephew in Alabama who had been lynched on an oak tree by a gang of whites.

According to the story, the leaves on the tree used for the lynching began to wither, yellowed and fell off, and the bough shrivelled and died. The tree emerges in Dunbar’s poem as a participant, a witness. The personified tree – an active, intimate spectator – is unable to withstand the memory of the horrors it witnessed and writhes in pain:

I feel the rope against my bark And the weight of him in my grain I feel in the throe of his final woe
The touch of my own last pain.²

We, like the Oak tree, feel the merging of self and other identities through modes of empathy and critical self-reflection, examined through tragedy. The ‘weight’, ‘feel’ and ‘touch’ the Oak tree experiences symbolise the burdens we confront from the Othered victims of our world. The self-imaging and identifying with the other is akin to Anna Letitia Barbauld’s poem on pregnancy, ‘To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to Become Visible’:

“She longs to fold to her maternal breast
Part of herself, yet to herself unknown;
To see and salute the stranger guest.”³

Both poets speak from an insider’s perspective – the baby is part of the mother and so too is the lynched victim part of the tree. Both mother and tree have an empathic identification with their ‘others’ and their emotional states become identical for that moment. The idea is provocative in its challenging us to imagine what is ‘unimagined’ in public consciousness, to construct an imagined scene of death, destruction, fear and outrage. Where there is an imagined ‘here’ and there’, there needs to be an imagined place-making and storying. What we do not see is what we must ‘see’.

No human being is seen to be part of an entirely homogenous entity. The Qur’ān makes clear that human beings ascribe to different nations and tribes and have differing behaviours. The Prophet (peace be upon him), in his interactions and dealings underwent a range of experiences with those who had not initially embraced Islam. Many of them were not hostile to him and his companions and he reciprocated with an exemplary compassion and empathy. He saw in each a potential for the acceptance of Islam – a potential for change.

One of the most infamous cases in America of racist brutality was found in the killing of Emmett Till, a young African American boy on holiday from Chicago to Mississippi, came to change the scope and outlook of the Civil Rights Movement. Though countless blacks had been killed in the early decades of the twentieth century, lynched or beaten to death, the killing of Emmett became an icon of white racism and brutality, galvanising the support of both blacks and whites. When his mutilated body was discovered in the Tallahatchie River, the police were eager that it remained sealed. Such a prospect was quickly rejected by his mother Maya Till who wanted to ‘see’ her son. Further, against police and state advice, she chose to have his funeral service in an open casket so others could also ‘see’ and bear witness to the racism that had killed her son. ‘This is what you did to my son. I want the world to see what you did’, she said. It was the sight of the disfigured Emmett lying in his coffin that brought home the truths of racism.

“We buried Emmett. The state of Mississippi said that that was not Emmett. They said: that it was impossible for a body to deteriorate that much in that length of time. But what they didn’t say, they didn’t bring out that the body was badly beaten, that the river water had burst the skin and it had peeled off the body. The water was hot, the beating was brutal. Then to beat him, they didn’t hear his cries. They didn’t touch them whatsoever. This one little colored boy that did hear them said that he heard screams coming from that barn about an hour and a half. He cried for God, he cried for his mother, he pleaded with them. But they were having such a good time, so they didn’t consider that he was a human being.”⁴

It is insightful for us at this stage for us to re-consider the well-known account of John Howard Griffin, a white American author who temporarily altered the pigment of his skin in order to experience and understand first-hand the life of a black man in the Southern states of America. He described his experience in the international bestseller ‘Black like Me’. The book recounts numerous incidents of the Othering of Black people, of the arousing of hatred and suspicion toward Griffin who, for the whites, was an African American. His experience is very telling of the psychology of dehumanisation prevalent in the Southern states during that time. He writes:

“I learned within a very few hours that no one was judging me by my qualities as a human

individual and everyone was judging me by my pigment. As soon as white men or women saw me, they automatically assumed I possessed a whole set of false characteristics (false not only to me but to all black men). They could not see me or any other black man as a human individual because they buried us under the garbage of their stereotyped view of us. They saw us as “different” from themselves in fundamental ways: we were irresponsible; we were different in our sexual morals; we were intellectually limited; we had a God-given sense of rhythm; we were lazy and happy-go-lucky; we loved watermelon and fried chicken. How could white men ever really know black men if on every contact the white man’s stereotyped view of the black man got in the way? I never knew a black man who felt this stereotyped view fit him. Always, in every encounter even with “good whites,” we had the feeling that the white person was not talking with us but with his image of us.”⁵

The concluding line here is very telling – “was not talking with us but with his image of us.” Othering is a caricaturising of another, a false-creation. As these examples outline, it obscures, demoralises and generates an irrational fear of another, leading to hatred, abuse and savagery.

The Qur’ān is clear in calling mankind to honour the deep appreciation of diversity in creation, to promote righteousness, and to challenge what inflames our destructive passions. It encourages us to reflect on the wonder of Allāh’s distinct creation:

“Another of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. There truly are signs in this for those who know.”⁶

“People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God’s eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all-Knowing, all-Aware.”⁷

The verse above is essential in undercutting and offsetting binary distinctions fuelled by hate. It uproots the desire to sow division and dissension, and to castigate one group as inferior and unworthy. It instead draws attention to the marvel within human differences. The verse teaches that seeking to be honoured, or being honoured, or ennobled is beautiful and yet though man might seek to inflate himself he might degrade another of a greater dignity, respect and worth. The verse emphasises that it is ultimately Allāh Who confers dignity upon man; our human framing of worth and greatness can often be skewed and lacking.

In the Prophet Muḥammad’s ﷺ last sermon during his Hajj in in the tenth year of Hijra, he made clear that all people are equal irrespective of ethnicity or colour and that the only thing that differentiates them is their acknowledgement, belief, fear, trust and love of Him (*taqwa*). It is this that would motivate them to good actions and make them cognisant of their personal and social responsibilities. The Prophet ﷺ declared:

“There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab and for a non-Arab over an Arab; or for white over the black or for the black over the white except in piety. Verily the noblest among you is he/she who is the most pious.”⁸

“Othering” is a process of constructing another people as radically different to one’s own group usually on the basis of racist discourses. Once the Prophet’s companion Abu Dharr insulted Bilal with reference to his mother, saying, “O son of a black woman!” Bilal went to the Prophet ﷺ and he told him what he said. The Prophet ﷺ became angry by what he heard. Later, Abu Dharr came to visit the Prophet, but he was unaware of what Bilal told him. The Prophet ﷺ turned away from him and Abu Dharr asked, “O Messenger of Allāh, have you turned away because of something you have been told?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Have you insulted Bilal by his mother? By the One who revealed the Book to Muḥammad, no one is better than another except by righteous deeds.”⁹

Contrary to the accentuating of such ‘Otherising’ differences, the Prophet’s sermon and his words to Abu Dharr emphasises that there can be no idea of a superior race or the castigating of others as inferior. Self and other is pronounced in equal terms as “Arab” and “non-Arab”, as “black” and “white”; the binaries of subordinates and dominants collapses in the Prophetic frame. People are

called on to accept diversity in what we think divides us. The idea is to concentrate not on the outer and superficial, but on the inner and transcendental. It is to be remembered that the Prophetic sermon begins with a call to the greater human body, “O People”, and that the divisions noted by the Prophet ﷺ are offset by a pursuit of personal and behavioural excellence in service of the One God, which can be acquired by any person irrespective of colour and ethnicity.

We, us, humanity, are a collective effort. Attempts at disfiguring and erasing of others from the human frame requires us all to reach across and bridge. We are to give a voice unto others – victims of war, genocide, social outcasts, the structurally dispossessed, victims of racism. In November 2015 Aboriginal David Dungay pleaded ‘I can’t breathe’ 12 times before he died while being restrained by five guards in a Sydney jail. “I can’t breathe” were also the final words of 24 year old Adama Traoré, a Malian *French* man who died in custody after being restrained and apprehended by police in 2016. His sister Assa Traoré spoke of her brother and George Floyd: “They died in the exact same way. They carried the weight of...three cops on them. They had the same words. And that was the end for George Floyd. That was also the end for Adama Traoré.”¹⁰ And there are so many others. We are to remember that the cost of suffering is measured not only in terms of physical destruction but of lives that have been lost, of psychological and spiritual damage, of the creating of countless ‘others’. We must challenge global media narratives and representations that otherise or exclude fellow humans from a collective state of worthiness, that unleash on others the stigma of devalued, dehumanised, identities. It is upon us to play important roles in building societies that connect people, that bridge. Bridging allows us to open spaces, to foster understanding, communication and an enhancing of the collective human spirit.

Let us remind ourselves that it is against our humanness to exhibit racism towards others, it is against what Allāh created naturally within us, which is to see, admire and respect each other. There needs to be a newfound attempt to see each other without the stereotypes, the walls, the distance both physical and cultural, that mar our perceptions of each other. The South African North Natal tribes have a beautiful greeting phrase, “Sawu bona” which literally means “I see you.” Another member of the tribe would reply “Sikhona” which literally means “I am here.” The implication of such a greeting is encapsulated in the idea that you see me in the now, as I am, without any hate or prejudice. You see my humanity.

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